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ABSTRACT

Three socioeconomic classes of rural students ages 6 to 18 were interviewed about their conceptions of the rich and poor and economic inequality. The 114 students in the sample were divided as follows: (1) middle class, 23; (2) working class, 61; and (3) lower class, 30. Responses of the students are analyzed according to Leahy's categories of descriptions of the rich and poor. These categories are (1) peripheral, referring to possessions, appearances, and behaviors; (2) central, referring to traits and thoughts; and (3) sociocentric, referring to life chances and class consciousness. Central characteristics, use of which increased with the respondent's age, were most frequently employed in defining classes of persons. Sociocentric responses were evident in describing the rich, while peripheral responses were used to describe the poor. Subjects seemed unable to explain inequalities in wealth. Both younger and older children viewed personal effort within the existing social structure as the main means of increasing wealth. It is suggested that rural children, though less isolated by socioeconomic class than urban children, may reflect a belief of limited socioeconomic mobility. Findings are interpreted from the perspective of three theoretical systems: cognitive developmental, functionalist, and conflict. Tentative implications for the social studies curriculum of elementary, junior, and senior high schools are presented. Includes 26 references and appendices. (CS)

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Rural Students Development of the Conception of Economic Inequality

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Abstract

Rural children and adolescents (ages 6-18) from three social classes were interviewed about their conceptions of economic inequality. The rich and poor were described referring to central (traits, thoughts) and sociocentric (class consciousness, life chances) characteristics. Sociocentric responses increased with age. Differences between rich and poor were increasingly described using central responses while inconsistency of response was evident in describing similarities. Diverse responses were given to explain inequalities in wealth. Personal effort was seen by older students as a means to upward social mobility. Younger subjects used definitional criteria to justify wealth while older subjects gave diverse responses. Findings were interpreted in terms of cognitive developmental, functionalist, and conflict theories. Tentative curriculum implications were presented.

Rural Students Development of the Conception of Economic Inequality

The social class system incorporates and reflects economic inequalities. Educators, particularly in the social studies, must present the social class system to students and help them to explore, understand, and develop their personal role in relation to it. Effects of the social class system on individuals have been widely discussed from different theoretical perspectives (Deutsch, Katz, Jensen, 1968; Jencks, 1972, Marx, 1844/1966; Parsons, 1960, Weber, 1946). How individuals come to conceptualize social class systems has not been widely investigated. The criteria people use in placing others into classes or their knowledge of which occupations or possessions are associated with different social classes have been the focus of most research (Centers, 1949; Simmons & Rosenberg, 1971; Tudor, 1971). This focus on criteria and knowledge gives limited insight into the rationale built to justify economic inequalities in society.

In order to understand how the conception of economic inequality develops it is necessary to explore children's and adolescent's descriptions and comparisons of rich and poor people, and their explanations, justifications and concepts of social mobility and change. Leahy has investigated the development of conceptions of economic inequality through examining these factors among children

and adolescents living in metropolitan areas along the eastern seaboard (1981, 1983). The purpose of this study was to extend Leahy's investigation to rural children and adolescents. Rural children are less isolated by socioeconomic class than are metropolitan children. They are likely to attend consolidated schools where children of all classes attend. They shop in the same stores and attend the same churches and recreational facilities that children of other classes attend. Particularly in relation to rich and poor children, as distinct from middle-and working-class children, it would seem that they are likely to think in terms of an individual being rich and not so much in terms of being a member of a class since often there are a few individuals who are well-to-do and these are too few to be lumped into a class. Because large populations do not exist classes are not likely to be stratified by living area, shopping areas, and other characteristics. This study investigated the development of the conception of economic inequality among rural children because the social situation in rural areas does differ from the social situation in metropolitan areas and may result in differing patterns of development of this concept.

In analyzing metropolitan children and adolescent's descriptions and comparisons of rich and poor people, Leahy (1981) categorized their responses of person description by whether they were peripheral (referring to possessions, appearances, and behaviors), central (referring to traits

and thoughts), and sociocentric (referring to life chances and class consciousness). Adolescents emphasized central and sociocentric categories more than younger children who emphasized peripheral characteristics in their descriptions. In describing the rich and poor life chances and thoughts were mentioned more frequently by lower- and working-class subjects than upper-middle-class subjects. The traits of the poor were most likely to be mentioned by upper-middle-class subjects.

Leahy (1983) also reported an age effect where adolescents were more likely than children to explain and justify inequality by referring to equity and were more fatalistic in their conceptions of change and in justifying wealth and poverty. Younger children were more likely than adolescents to claim that individual mobility and social change could be achieved through others giving money to poor individuals and less likely to say that social change could be achieved by changing the social structure. Upper-middle-class subjects were more likely than others to claim that poverty cannot be changed and that poverty is due to equity or wasting money and less likely than lower-class subjects to claim that the poor should not suffer. Lower class 17-year-olds were more likely than any other group to claim that the rich would resist social change.

Most earlier research focused on either the development of knowledge of or affective allegiance to social institutions (Jahoda, 1959; Simmons & Rosenberg, 1971;

Tudor, 1971; Hess & Torney, 1967). This body of research has indicated that allegiance to the value of social institutions increases throughout childhood and adolescence (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Greenstein, 1965; Hess & Torney, 1967).

Leahy's (1983) work indicated the existence of cognitive developmental trends in conceptualizations of social structure. Piaget (1932) proposed that between the ages of 6 and 11 years, there is a change from authority to equality to equity based conceptions of justice. Others have shown mixed findings as to whether equity gains precedence over equality between the ages of 6 and 11 years (Hook, 1978; Hook & Cook, 1979; Lane & Coon, 1972; Lerner, 1974; Leventhal & Lane, 1970; Furby, 1979).

Sociocentric conceptions of social structure are reflected in explanations of economic inequality that refer to the nature of the economic or political system. Conceptions of social change that are sociocentric might also refer to changing the economic or political system as opposed to focusing on the characteristics (such as effort or intelligence) of the individuals making up different economic classes. Leahy (1981, 1983) explored whether there was an increasing emphasis on conceptions of social structure with increasing age. He found that younger children were less likely to say social change could be achieved by changing the social structure.

Consensus and conflict theories are also important in regard to development of an understanding of social structure and economic inequality. Functionalist theory is a theory of consensus. It argues that there is a wide consensus as to the nature of the system which stratifies people into classes. This consensus stabilizes social institutions through socializing members of the society to a shared ideology justifying unequal distribution of social goods (Merton, 1957; Parsons, 1960). Functionalist theory also suggests that increasing age results in the socialization of the child and in the internalization of the social consensus. Increasing age, therefore, is associated with an increasing justification of inequality. Confict, or dialectical theory, on the other hand, states that conflict will occur in interpretations of social reality. Differing interpretations result from the system which stratifies people into different classes (Marx, 1844/1966; Weber, 1946).

Each theory, consensus and conflict, predicts the development of different and contrasting conceptions of economic inequalities. First, consensus or functionalist theory predicts a general lack of conflict as most members of society share a similar conception of economic inequality. Conflict theory predicts obvious class and race differences in the conception of economic class. Increasing age might, therefore, be associated with incrasing class and race differences as children gain social experience and

become aware of competing interests between races and classes. Second, functionalist theory appears to suggest that the shared conceptions of inequality generally should emphasize the legitimacy of class differences. Therefore economic class differences would be explained and justified by equity resulting from the amount of work expended or from other factors. Differences would not be challenged.

This study considered the following questions, each of which was related to Leahy's work (1981, 1983). The research questions focused on two areas; first, descriptions and comparisons of the rich and the poor and second, explanations and justifications of economic inequality. The research questions also considered the effectiveness of explanations of the development of the concept of economic inequality as theorized by cognitive developmental, consensus and conflict theories.

1. Can trends be identified in the definition of classes of persons in terms of peripheral or central characteristics?
2. Is there developmental change in the recognition that social class entails more than the characteristics of individual members of groups?
3. Are there age differences in the recognition of differences and similarities between rich and poor people?
4. Do age trends exist in the use of equity concepts in explaining and justifying economic inequality?

5. Is there an increasing emphasis on conceptions of social structure with increasing age?

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 120 randomly chosen children and adolescents living in rural areas in a south central state (Table 1). Among the subjects 118 were Caucasian and 2 black, an accurate reflection of the demography of the areas in which the children resided where there were very few non-Caucasian children. Because of their small number, the black subjects were dropped from the final analysis of the study reducing the number of subjects to 118. The subjects lived in areas where the primary occupation was farming although some children's parents were employed in service occupations or by local government. They included 57 boys and 57 girls. The age groups were as follows: ages 6-8, 14; ages 9-12, 28; ages 13-15, 58; and ages 16-18, 14. When identified by socioeconomic class following Edward's (1943) index the numbers in each class were: I. upper-upper-middle class, 4; II. middle class, 23; III. working class, 61; and IV. lower class, 30. This distribution reflected the demography of the counties in which the children resided where there were few class I residents and a majority of working class residents. Because there were so few class I children this group was not utilized in the analysis of the data resulting in a final sample group of 114 children and adolescents.

Instrument

All subjects were individually interviewed by graduate students who had grown up in the areas from which the subjects were drawn. The interviewers used the questions in Leahy's study (1981, 1983). These were: 1) "Describe rich people." "What are they like?" 2) "Describe poor people." "What are they like?" 3) "How are rich people different from poor people?" 4)"How are rich people the same as poor people?" 5) "Why are some people rich while others are poor?" 6) "Why are some people poor while others are rich?" 7) "Should some people be rich while others are poor?" 8) "Should some people be poor, while others are rich?" 9) "How could a poor person get to be rich someday?" 10) "What would have to happen so that there would be no poor people?" 11) "How could you get rich someday?" An additional question was also asked, 12) "Are you rich or poor?"

Interviewers worked with five children and adolescents in practice interviews which were taped and discussed. Interviews with the study's subjects were also tape recorded and transcriptions made. Interviewers were restricted to using the above questions and nonleading probes. Graduate students also scored the interviews. They scored three practice interviews and discussed the results. Interrater reliability coefficients of .87 to .96 were achieved on the study interviews.

Content Analysis

Leahy's (1981,1983) categories were utilized although the interviews were also examined for other possible categories. No other categories appeared with enough frequency (more than 4% of the responses) to be added to the content analysis. The content analysis for responses to each of the questions reflected both psychological and sociological or political conceptions of economic inequality. Peripheral, central and sociocentric descriptions and conceptions of class were scored. Explanations of wealth and poverty were scored using several categories (luck, motivation, and ability) derived from attribution theory (Weiner, 1972). Other categories of explanations referring to occupation, education, social structure, investments and savings, and race, reflected sociological snd political theories of class (Krauss, 1976). An equity conception category was also used where equity was broadly defined as a belief that rewards are contingent on output or behavior.

Political conceptions of inequality, such as justifying inequality by reference to maintaining a political-economic system or challenging inequality because of alienation or class conflicts, were infrequent, 4% or less, at any age. Few subjects responded to a question with "I don't know". All questions except numbers 5 and 9 usually received a response which attempted to answer the question. Some conceptions appearing frequently enough (4%) in Leahy's

content analysis did not appear as frequently in this study. One conception rarely used (less than 4%) was violating the law. The subjects did not view violating the law as a rationale for wealth or poverty or as a means to become rich. Another response rarely given involved "having the right connections" (less than 3%). Subjects rarely were fatalistic in their responses (less than 3.5%) nor did they deny that people's situations could be changed (less than 3.5%). Finally, the review of the interviews indicated that several conceptions were frequently used, for example, descriptions of the rich and the poor identifying them by their possessions and traits, explanations of why rich and poor differ by referring to their possessions, of why they are the same by referring to their behaviors and mentioning that they are both people, and mentioning work as a reason why people are rich or poor and how the poor and oneself could become rich. These categories are included in the final content analysis. The content analysis allowed for the categorization of 82 to 98% of all responses.

After content analysis was completed, statistical analysis occurred using frequency counts, percentages, and analyses of variance followed by separate Scheffe comparisons. In all analyses reported here, the dependent measure was the percentage of responses given by a subject falling within each category defined by the content analysis. As in Leahy's study (1981, 1983) only effects of p .01 were considered to be of significance. The

percentages of responses within each category for each question are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Results

Responses to Questions

1. How would you describe rich people?

Peripheral responses were given with most frequency by the subjects. Sociocentric responses were given with greater frequency than were central responses. The use of peripheral responses showed no significant change with age while the use of central and sociocentric responses increased between ages 6 and 18. References to class consciousness increased with age, between 6 and 18, $F(3,110=6.67)$. No effects were found with class or sex. References to life chances of the rich comprised fewer than 4% of all responses.

2. How would you describe poor people?

The use of peripheral responses increased between ages 6 to 12. The use of central responses continued to increase through age 18. The increase in central responses was primarily due to an increase in references to personal traits $F(3,110=4.02)$ while the increase in peripheral responses was primarily due to an increase in mention of residence $F(3,110=16.11)$. Sociocentric responses were not significantly evident among the subjects. References to the motivations of the poor comprised fewer than 3% of all responses.

3. How are rich and poor people different?

Responses related to central characteristics demonstrated an interaction between age and socioeconomic status. Lower class children between ages 9 and 15 were more likely to refer to central characteristics, particularly a person's thoughts, ($F_{3,110}=2.44$) than were other subjects. With all groups reference to thoughts indicated a trend to increase with age and with lower socioeconomic status groups. Reference to the rich and poor differing because of their possessions, a peripheral characteristic, were high among 6 to 12 year olds, decreasing thereafter but still remaining a frequent response.

4. How are rich and poor people the same?

No significant trends were found with responses to this question. References to appearances and thoughts were found with less than 4% of the responses.

5. Why are some people rich while others are poor?

There was a significant interaction effect between age and socioeconomic status in giving a definition as a response to this trend $F(3,110=3.14)$. Children from the lowest class and the oldest children tended to respond to the question with a definition. As socioeconomic status rose there tended to be an increasing use of a definition with age. There was an interaction effect related to referring to a definition in answering this question such that children from middle class and upper class status and older children, ages 12-18 were most likely to give a definition. Children between 6 and 11

years and in lower or working class status did not use definitions as a response. There was an age effect in identifying an inheritance as a reason for being rich with children between 9 and 18 $F(3,110=3.99)$. Less than 4% of responses referred to effort, education, intelligence, or demographics.

The tendency to say "I don't know" decreased significantly with age $F(3,110=4.73)$ with 6-8 year olds giving all the responses of this type. Fifteen percent of the responses did not fit into any identified category and were diverse from each other.

6. Why are some people poor while others are rich? Poor people's lack of effort was significantly cited as the major reason why they were poor $F(3,110=3.21)$. There was a significant interaction effect $F(8,105=2.71)$ in which effort was cited more frequently as age increased between 6 and 18 years and as socioeconomic status increased. The oldest students from the highest socioeconomic status were most likely to cite lack of effort as a cause for poverty. Responses comprising less than 4% of the total were violating the law, not inheriting money, intelligence, and use of money.

7. Should some people be poor while others are rich? No significant differences were found between groups in response to this question. There was a nonsignificant tendency for subjects by socioeconomic status to refer to the consequences to the poor of being poor while others are

rich. As socioeconomic status decreased the tendency to refer to consequences of poverty increased. Responses referring to a definition comprised less than 4% of the total.

8. Should some people be rich while others are poor?

A definition was given with significant frequency in response to this question $F(8,105=2.81)$. An interaction effect was found such that a steady drop occurred with decreasing socioeconomic status and increasing age. Reference to a definition comprised less than 4% of the responses.

9. How could a poor person get to be rich someday?

Asking others for money $F(3,110=5.88)$ was a response which rose from age 6 through 12 and decreased thereafter. Luck tended to be mentioned at all ages and socioeconomic levels but not significantly. The response "I don't know" increased significantly between ages 6 through 12 and then decreased $F(3,110=3.92)$. References to not wanting to be rich, violating the law and getting the right connections constituted less than 4% of the responses.

10. What would have to happen so that there would be no more poor people?

Responses to this question were diverse. No significant trends were noted. Responses referring to getting rid of people, denying it is possible, resistance to change and changing values constituted less than 4% of the total.

11. How could you get rich someday?

Personal effort was significantly cited by respondents $F(3,110=5.69)$ in a pattern whereby the youngest children, ages 6-8, cited effort, this dropped off between 9 and 12 and increased strongly again after age 12.

12. Are you rich or poor?

No significant responses were found with this question. There was a trend for younger children to identify themselves as rich (ages 6-8) while older children (ages 9-18) tended to identify themselves as neither rich nor poor but in the middle. A few lower class children described themselves as sometimes rich and sometimes poor.

Conclusions

The results of the study demonstrate that, overall, age appears to be a dominant factor in the study. Sex did not appear to impact on the development of a conception of economic inequality. Socioeconomic status had an effect on the subject's responses to some questions when it was interacting with age.

The conclusions of this study are organized with respect to the five research questions. The results are viewed from the perspective of the three theoretical systems from which guidelines for the study were derived: cognitive developmental, functionalist, and conflict.

Defining Classes

Central characteristics were most used in defining classes of persons and increased in use with age.

Sociocentric responses were also evident in describing the rich while peripheral responses were evident in describing the poor. The results of this study differed from Leahy's (1981) study in that the description and comparison of the rich using peripheral characteristics did not show a substantial decrease with age. However, subjects between ages 6 and 12 did show an increase in referring to peripheral characteristics when describing the poor. Rural students generally do not experience the stratification of housing by socioeconomic class which exists in metropolitan areas. It is likely that these subjects will be more familiar with the residences, clothing, and other outward characteristics of their poor peers than students living in a metropolitan area would be. Therefore, their descriptions of poor people could be expected to include these peripheral components particularly during the elementary school years when children's world expands as they ride school buses whose routes may take them past the residences of peers from all classes and as their general sphere of movement in the world outside their home enlarges.

The use of central characteristics in describing both the rich and poor increased between ages 6 and 18. In describing the poor, personal traits were frequently mentioned. Leahy (1981) found class effects with upper-middle-class subjects more likely than subjects from other classes to mention traits of the poor. He also found that lower-and working-class subjects were more likely to

mention life chances and thoughts in reference to both the rich and the poor. Socioeconomic status effects were not evident in this study. The difference in results may be due to these students greater likelihood of interacting with students from all classes at school, church and in other daily activities. Because schools and other institutions are small and personal interaction between subjects more likely, descriptions may focus on individual traits.

Sociological Dimensions

Leahy (1981) found that descriptions and comparisons of the rich and the poor were generally unrelated to sociological dimensions of social class. In this study sociocentric descriptions of the rich increased between ages 6 and 18 while these responses in relation to the poor remained stable. References to the rich indicating class consciousness increased with age but this was not true with references to the poor. Since more subjects were identified as working-or lower-class than middle class in this study it could be that, as they matured, these students became more aware of the differences of the wealthier students from the greater number of lower-income students. This greater awareness could be translated into a personal identification with the poor. It has been suggested that adolescence is a period of increased awareness of the relevance of the social system in one's life (Adelson & O'Neill, 1966; Kohlberg, 1969; Selman, 1976; Leahy, 1981). A gradual change was seen with age in this study suggesting that the change may be

cognitive developmental relating to maturing of intellectual structures and not associated with social and other developments restricted to adolescence.

Similarities and Differences

Responses varied when differences and similarities of the rich and poor were considered. Central responses were more consistently used in describing differences. Rich and poor people's thoughts were considered different particularly as the age of the subject increased and the socioeconomic status decreased. Responses relating to similarities were diverse showing no consistent trends. These results differed somewhat from Leahy's (1981) who found sociocentric responses also increasing with age and peripheral responses showing a curvilinear trend increasing through age 11 and decreasing afterwards. The increasing reference with age to central characteristics in describing differences does suggest cognitive developmental effects. The diversity of responses in describing similarities may relate to the percentage of lower-and working-class students in this study. If they perceive themselves as poor or as having much in common with the poor then they may have difficulty in consistently describing similarities they have with the rich.

The results relating to the first three research questions do not indicate that dialectical or conflict models of class awareness emphasizing class conflict are descriptive of these subjects. While class consciousness in

reference to descriptions of the rich did increase with age no difference was evident with socioeconomic status. Nor did lower-or working-class subjects emphasize the life chances of the rich or poor. Also class consciousness was used in describing the rich more than in describing the poor (23% vs 3%). This results are consistent with Leahy's (1981) findings.

Theoretical Implications of the First Three Research Questions

The results relating to the first three research questions indicate that a cognitive developmental model may account for many of the findings. Sex and class appeared to have minimal impact on these results. Age showed the most consistent effect. The results are not as broad as those found by Leahy. Fewer differences were found among the subjects. Sociocentric and peripheral responses did show some increase with age suggesting an increasing awareness of the complexity of the social system. However, central responses also showed an increase which did not occur in Leahy's study. It is possible that the more frequent interaction of these subjects with students from other classes and the greater mixing of housing areas resulted in the greater reference to central characteristics.

A second model which can be used to explain the results and which can be complimentary to the cognitive developmental model is the general functionalist model of socialization. This model suggests that socializaiton

results in considerable uniformity among classes as to the nature of the social class system. This uniformity encourages stability in social institutions while delineating the rationale for unequal economic distribution within society. The uniformity among classes apparent in most descriptions in this study lends support to the functionalist model.

Equity Concepts

A response which explained wealth by using definitional criteria ("some people are rich because they have a lot of money") was given most frequently as age increased and socioeconomic status decreased. Older subjects were also more likely to refer to inheritance as a reason for being rich. Younger children were more likely to be unable to explain why some people are rich and some poor with this response disappearing as they matured. These subjects did not consistently use similar explanations justifying inequalities of wealth and poverty. Getting money from others, a sharing of wealth, was mentioned by younger children as a means of equalizing economic status. Younger children found it more difficult to suggest how economic inequalities could be overcome, increasingly responding "I don't know" through age 12. Effort was seen as a personal means of increasing wealth by younger children through age 12 and late adolescents ages 16 to 18.

These responses do not suggest a clear trend of increasing use of equity concepts in explaining and

justifying economic inequality. In general, the subjects seemed unable to explain or justify inequalities consistently. Adolescents did make greater attempts to explain and justify inequalities than did younger children.

Social Structure

A clear trend in increasing emphasis on conceptions of social structure was not found with age. These subjects did not refer frequently to social structure. Their responses tended to focus on personal effort, inheritance, and other individualized factors rather than on social structure or changes in that structure which could contribute to greater economic equality. The rural lives of these subjects could reflect a conception of limited mobility. These subjects live in the eastern U.S. where families settled on farms and in rural areas in the late 1700's and early 1800's. Farm size does not seem to change rapidly over generations. Many families may not have changed socioeconomic status greatly. These children may understand the social structure to be static and may not see much opportunity for substantial change. It is unlikely that there will be much industrial development in these rural areas so new opportunities for change may be viewed as unlikely. Personal effort was viewed by younger and older children as a means of increasing wealth. These children may perceive the social structure as static, new opportunities as unlikely, and therefore personal effort within the existing structure as the only means of increasing wealth.

Theoretical Implications of the Fourth and Fifth Research Questions

The data support the cognitive developmental model somewhat. Age trends are obvious and show some increase in maturity of thinking as answers such as "I don't know" and sharing of money as a way to eliminate poverty decrease in adolescence. However, since clear trends are not evident there is limited support for this model. Leahy (1983) found ambiguous support for the cognitive developmental model because of complex results without evident strong trends. This study's findings are similar to Leahy's but are more diverse than his.

Functionalist theory suggests that with increasing age and socialization to the society's rationale of stratification, allegiance to the justification of inequality increases. Because of the lack of consistent response patterns this model does not have strong support. However, since the subjects do not suggest changing the social structure the model receives tacit support. If the subjects do view their society as static and do not advocate change then the functionalist model has some support. Leahy (1983) also found ambiguous support for the functionalist model. This study's findings, however, may be more supportive of the model than Leahy's.

Dialectical theories focusing on the conflicting perspectives of social groups were not supported by the findings of this study. Class differences, for the most

part, were not manifested with increasing age. This finding concurs with Leahy's (1983) finding of very few class differences in explanations and justifications of economic inequality.

The findings of this study agree with and differ from Leahy's (1981, 1983) findings to some extent. There is evidence for an age effect among both metropolitan and rural students. The age effect seems to reflect increasing cognitive development. Therefore, a cognitive developmental model has the best, albeit limited, support from these studies.

Limitations

This study has limitations which affect interpretation of its findings. While the sample was a relatively large one to be used in a study whose methodology focused on interviews, a larger sample would have given better representation to sexes, ages, classes and races. The interview method itself did allow for a divergence of responses but may have also limited them because the subjects may have wanted to impart views they thought were socially desirable. Because the vocabulary inherent in discussions of society, social classes, socioeconomic status, economic systems and related concepts is not common among most children, many concepts may not be verbalized in interviews even though children have a conception of them. A more structured interview, combined with stories which children can react to and evaluate might elicit conceptions

which children find difficult to verbalize. Finally, research in this area needs to be completed with children representing other cultures and other samples within this culture.

Curriculum Implications

The findings of this study and of Leahy's study indicate that social studies educators have not provided sufficient opportunities for children and adolescents to work with the concept of economic inequality. The lack of consistency in responses suggests that there may be many facets which students have never considered. Students may also need opportunities to think through and verbalize their conceptions.

Although more research investigating the development of the conception of economic inequality needs to be carried out, some curriculum implications can be tentatively presented. It would appear that elementary school children are capable of discussing characteristics of the rich and the poor. Such discussion should encourage children to consider peripheral, central and sociocentric characteristics. Similarities and differences should also be discussed at the elementary school level. Finally, social mobility should be considered by children in the upper elementary grades.

Junior and senior high students need to discuss characteristics and similarities and differences between the rich, the poor and those in the middle. These students

should be encouraged to consider central and sociocentric characteristics. Social mobility and the rationale for current social stratification and the economic inequality it represents ought also to be considered. Students should think about avenues for social mobility open to members of different classes. For example, crime may seem to be a quick avenue to increased wealth for students from neighborhoods where drug dealers seem to be wealthy while everyone else is poor. Working class students may talk about winning a lottery or becoming a professional basketball star. These and other avenues to wealth should be discussed in terms of positive and negative aspects and the likelihood of each in producing success and wealth (for example, "What percentage of high school basketball players can be expected to become professional players?") Functionalist and dialectical theories of social systems can be explored once students have explored social mobility using concrete examples.

The social studies program prepares students to live in a democratic society. Students cannot be active, responsible members of a democratic society if they cannot describe the inequalities existing in their society, explain why they think those inequalities are there, and suggest how the society should cope with those inequalities.

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Table 1

Distribution by social class, age, and sex of sample (n=114)

	age				
Class	6-8	9-12	13-15	16-18	Total
Middle Class					
Males	1	4	6	2	13
Females	0	0	8	2	10
Total	1	4	14	4	23
Working Class					
Males	5	10	13	2	30
Females	2	8	16	4	31
Total	7	18	29	6	62
Lower Class					
Males	2	4	6	2	14
Females	3	3	8	2	16
Total	5	7	14	4	30

Table 2

Percentage of responses by superordinate categories

Question & Category	age				
	6	11	14	17	Total
Rich people					
Peripheral	30.3	43.3	26.7	33.7	33.5
Central	0.0	10.5	27.5	40.5	19.6**
Sociocentric	0.0	8.0	35.0	64.0	26.8**
Poor people					
Peripheral	37.7	44.7	23.7	23.3	32.4*
Central	22.5	34.5	44.5	50.0	37.9*
Sociocentric	2.0	7.0	12.0	7.0	7.0
Rich and Poor Different?					
Peripheral	53.5	48.5	38.0	39.0	44.8
Central	7.0	27.5	20.0	35.5	22.5*
Sociocentric	0.0	10.0	12.0	25.0	23.5
Rich and Poor Same?					
Peripheral	7.0	10.5	10.0	9.0	9.1
Central	20.5	17.0	32.5	42.5	28.1
Sociocentric	16.0	18.0	25.3	33.0	23.1

* $P < .01$
** $P < .001$

Table 3

Categories showing significant age trends

Question & Category	age 6-8	9-12	13-15	16-18	Total	Age Eff.
Rich						
Class Consciousness	0.0	14.1	35.0	64.0	28.3	6.67*
Poor						
Residence	43.2	52.0	4.1	7.0	26.6	16.11*
Traits	43.0	61.9	77.2	93.1	68.8	4.02*
Different						
Possessions	92.9	85.9	59.1	64.0	75.5	4.45*
Why rich						
Inherit	0.0	30.4	29.6	56.9	29.2	3.99*
Don't know	14.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.5	4.73*
How get rich						
ask others	20.7	31.4	4.0	0.0	14.0	5.88*
Don't know	0.0	14.0	0.0	0.0	3.5	3.92*
Self becoome rich						
Effort	10.2	8.9	12.1	50.2	20.4	7.22**

* P = .01
** P = .001